



Sermon

Matthew 3:13-17
The Epiphany of Our Lord
January 13, 2008
Historic St. George's UMC
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Are You Smarter Than a Fifth Grader?

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said. "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Matthew 3:16-17

Have you seen the TV program called *Are You Smarter Than a Fifth Grader?* Playing for a million dollars, adult contestants get asked a series of questions from fifth grade science, math, grammar, biology, history and geography. With the support of six fifth graders and the chance to peek and even copy their answers, people like you and I are put to the test. From what I've seen, every adult stumbles over something they may have heard once but have long since forgotten.

I'm thinking of this because I read about a pastor who had an *Are You Smarter Than a Fifth Grader?* type experience. She said she used to have a very lovely, gentle, bucolic image of the story of the baptism of Jesus. The sky was blue. The water was frothy. The Spirit was fluttery, floating down to rest on Jesus head just as he rises from the river Jordan. Her minds eye saw a sweet picture of the perfect baptism – until her fifth grade son corrected her.

They were eating dinner. She was telling her husband and sons about the sermon she was preparing for Baptism of the Lord Sunday. She described the part of the gospel reading about "the Spirit of God descending like a dove." She said, "Can't you just imagine it?" making graceful gestures and wing motions with her hands.

That's when her eleven year old jumped in. "Wait a minute, Mom," he said. "That's *NOT* how doves fly. Doves swoop. Doves dive. Doves dart. They're fast. When they want to catch something, they don't flutter down. They zoom like a hawk: BAM!"

She remembers that as he demonstrated this with hand motions of his own, she caught his glass of milk just in time or it would have went flying all over the table.

Crestfallen, Pastor Mom said: "Oh, I didn't know that about doves" as another safe, comfortable biblical image bit the dust. But maybe an even better one was born.

Thinking of doves as swoopers, divers and zoomers as opposed to flitters, floaters and flutterers takes us in a direction we might have never imagined left to our more routine images about baptism. We usually think of baptism as something nice, cuddly and cute, especially when it involves children, which in our tradition baptism most often does. Even if an adult is baptized it's a pretty warm and fuzzy thing, welcoming someone into the community of faith.

But thinking about descending doves alighting in swoop, dive and zoom mode – that changes a few things. What about baptism as spiritual target practice, God zooming, nose-diving to you and me? Or what about Jesus as the Spirit's prey?

Usually we think about baptism in terms of choice, a choice on the part of the believer, or a choice on the part the believer's kin. We choose to receive the sacrament of baptism, or choose for our children to receive it. Baptism is about something *we do*, something *we choose for ourselves*, and those we love, those we want to grow up believing in God and following Jesus. Our choice for baptism sets in motion a world of new relationships and realities.

But speaking pragmatically – we like things pragmatic – focusing on the choice we make in and for baptism often leads to some misconceptions and memory lapses that have us wanting to (pardon the mixed metaphor) throw the baby out with the baptismal water.

C'mon, admit it. I will if you will. You come to church on a Sunday when there's a baptism of an infant. And you've rarely if ever seen the parents in church. And you start prognosticating – "Huh. I bet we'll never see them again. Why are *they* here for baptism anyway? What good is the baptism if they never come back? I bet they never will. Baptism really means little or nothing for the child, it's mainly a service of dedication for the parents. Baptism is ineffective unless they bring the child to Sunday School. Baptism doesn't mean anything if the child doesn't understand what we are doing."

Here's what I'm getting at: If our choices in baptism were all there is to it, we'd have a point.

But choice, that's only the half of it, if it's even that much. The reason I like the 5th graders take on the dove is because it helps remind us that baptism isn't the choice coming-out-party for babies we often make it. Baptism as an act by which the Spirit targets us, even descends like a swooping bird, points to another's choice: God's choice. It calls into question our choice in the matter. It points to God's choice of us. After all, what choice does an object of prey have? Does one targeted choose to be chased? Does the one targeted choose to be hunted? The best they can do is duck. And even then...

Perhaps this is why Matthew includes the odd little interchange between John the Baptizer and Jesus in which John tries to talk Jesus out of coming to him for baptism: I should be baptized by *you*," John exclaims. John is confused and even dismayed at the impropriety of this episode. Jesus coming to him to be baptized? Shouldn't it be the other way around? But Jesus sees it differently. "Let it be so for now," he tells John, "for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." (Matthew 3:16) Sounds to me like Jesus knows he's been targeted. He is the Spirit's prey. He can only submit to his baptism, to the sure and certain knowledge he is God's beloved Son.

Here's my point: How might our lives be different if we saw our baptism, or remembered our baptism as our being targeted to be God's very own. How might our lives be different if we connected and reconnected to our baptism not as once

upon a time or once and done. How might our lives be different if we experienced baptism as an act of surrender instead of an act of choice? How might we look at one another if we saw the inevitability of our being loved by God?

Or that it is God's very nature to chase us and hunt for us until we are found?

What if the Spirit has targeted us from long ago, and will surely swoop down on each of us to gather us in – because that is the proper way that Jesus fulfills all righteousness?

After Jesus rises up from the waters of baptism, the gospels say, he enters the wilderness. Talk about choice, that's where real choice begins – in the wilderness and all the devil's temptations try to convince him he is *not* a beloved child of God.

As far as baptism is concerned, we concentrate too much on the choices we make and not enough about God's choice. You could say baptism requires very little human choice. It is simply a fact: we are loved by God through no act of our own. It is God's nature to love us. It is *our* nature to be sought, over and over again. We must be quite good at hiding in the brush like small wild things because the Spirit continues to hunt for us with the speed, swoop, dive, dart and zoom of doves.

How strange and wonderful it is that the scripture and its images can lead us on interesting chases and with surprising twist and turns. We're likely to think of ourselves as the ones seeking, hunting and setting traps for the meaning that eludes us. We think we are the ones pursuing God. And maybe sometimes we are.

But thank God for 5th graders and how they see with fresh eyes what we've long since forgotten. It is God who seeks out what is lost or driven away. It is God who dives and swoops. Thank heavens for that. Would you rather have a god who is a flutterer?

Let's face it, in terms of our choices we are imperfect daughters and sons of the divine and unfinished followers of Jesus. Baptism may be the clearest moment when God's choice for and claim upon human life is announced. It takes time to see if we're going to live as if we belong to God. So we

baptize in promise and expectation. God *will* work in your life and mine. God *will* descend. God *will* alight. Every one of us requires a voice, a darting dove, some heavenly opening not of our own choice or deserving we won't get home.

Maybe you'll be taking a bath or a break, maybe you'll be in church or some place far from it, maybe you'll be so busy you can hardly think or just staring off into space, maybe you break more commandments than you keep or doubt more of the creed

than believe, but just when you thought you've got your world all safe and silent, the once hushed heavens open, a voice inexplicable but undeniable, some big bird swoops and with it some new wind stirs.

It all started that day at the fount. I'm reminding you it all started at the water. The day God targeted you. Amen.

Amen.

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